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The Role of Women in the American Restoration Movement

Early Women Preachers on the Eastern Seaboard

There has never been a completely uniform view of the role of women in the work and worship of the church in the Restoration Movement, and this was particularly true in America at the turn of the 19th century. This is understandable because the desire to be free from authoritative denominational controls, clergy power structures, and rigid sectarian creeds led to a freedom of belief and practice that fostered a variety of views. For example, from the time of James O'Kelly in the 1790s to the days of Elias Smith in the early 1800s, a number of women were quietly appointed to preach in Virginia, North Carolina, and the New England states. Some, like Nancy Cram (1776-1815) and Abigail Roberts (1791-1841)—a convert of Cram—conducted revival meetings, baptized hundreds, and planted a number of congregations along the eastern seaboard.¹

These “female preachers,” like O'Kelly and Smith, desired to be just “Christians,” and they took the titles “Church of Christ” or “Christian Church” as the more biblical designations for their congregations. However, because of their opposition to denominational names, creeds, and clergy control, as well as their scorn for social conventions—as women preachers—they aroused much opposition from mainline Protestant churches. At that time in America, only the Quakers and the Shakers allowed women to address mixed assemblies, especially in churches.² So, they were accused of stirring up revolution among the people, “turning the world upside down,” and teaching heresy.³

The very use of women as public preachers was seen as the height of “unblushing impudence,” for it meant that they had abandoned “the restraints and safety” of the home and become “strolling associates of men.” Such behavior was viewed as an “outrage against social relations and the order of the church of God.”⁴ To these charges, however, women such as Nancy Towle of New Hampshire felt that she had a higher calling to the divine will of God to which she must respond and give precedence rather than cultural conventions presided over by authoritarian males. She believed that in Jesus Christ, according to Gal. 3:28, there was “neither male nor female” and that in both the Old and New Testaments holy men and women were moved by the Holy Spirit to prophesy, which she said, “amounts to none other . . . than the preaching of the Gospel.”⁵

¹C. Leonard Allen, *Distant Voices: Discovery of a Forgotten Past for a Changing Church* (Abilene: ACU Press, 1993), 23.

²David E. Harrell, Jr. *Quest for a Christian America: The Disciples of Christ and American Society to 1866* (Nashville, TN: Disciples of Christ Historical Society, 1966), 203.

³A Presbyterian minister in New York, Gilbert McMaster, made the above charges in a book entitled: *An Essay in Defense of Some Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity: Including a Review of Elias Smith and the Claims of His Female Preachers* (Schenectady, NY, 1815), as cited by Allen, *Distant Voices*, 25.

⁴*Ibid.*, 26.

⁵*Ibid.*, 27.

Barton Stone and Early Women Preachers in the West

If the phenomenon of women preachers was fairly common in the early days of the Restoration Movement in the eastern United States, it was less so in the west. To be sure, there were some women who preached, exhorted, and testified among Churches of Christ associated with Barton W. Stone. A notable example was Nancy Mulkey, the daughter of John Mulkey, the former Separate Baptist preacher, who led many of his flock out of that denomination into the Stone Movement in the early 1800s. Nancy served as an "exhorter" in her father's church. Concerning her, Isaac Jones said,

She would arise with zeal on her countenance and fire in her eyes, and with a pathos that showed in the depths of her soul, and would pour forth an exhortation lasting from five to fifteen minutes, which neither father nor brother could equal, and which brought tears from every feeling eye.⁶

Joseph Thomas, the North Carolina "Christian" preacher, who heard her preach in 1810, said that he was amazed at "her flow of speech and consistency of ideas." He believed that she spoke "surely by the power of the Holy Ghost."⁷

Early in Barton Stone's ministry, he participated in the Great Cane Ridge revival of 1801 in Kentucky in which many bizarre phenomena, called "exercises," began to occur. These were understood to be outward manifestations of the Holy Spirit that were experienced by men, women, and children. Stone specifically refers to two exuberant young ladies who were "attending to the exercises and preaching at the time. Instantly they both fell, with a shriek of distress, and lay for more than an hour apparently in a lifeless state."⁸ Then after awhile, they rose up and spoke of the love of Jesus and the glory of the gospel to the surrounding crowd, while exhorting all to turn to the Lord in repentance.⁹

In 1811 when Joseph Thomas visited one of Stone's churches in Concord, Kentucky, he witnessed a similar type of spiritual exercise by a pious lady, a kind of "heavenly" singing that attracted everyone as they all listened in silence. He commented that "none could ever be tired of hearing it" and concluded that it was "something surpassing anything we had known in nature."¹⁰ Stone's own views about these highly emotional and strange "exercises" are somewhat enigmatic. He seemed to accept them as the authentic "work of God" and rejoiced in the conversion of sinners and the revival of saints, and yet, he did not see them as normative to the conversion process and never particularly encouraged them.¹¹

⁶Isaac Jones, "The Reformation in Tennessee," cited by J.M. Grant in "A Sketch of the Reformation in Tennessee," manuscript, Center for Restoration Studies, ACU, 55.

⁷Joseph Thomas, *The Life of the Pilgrim Joseph Thomas* (Winchester, VA: J. Foster, Printer, 1817), 132; cited by Richard Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 1996), 377.

⁸John Rogers, *The Biography of Elder Barton Warren Stone, Written by Himself: With Additions and Reflections by Elder John Rogers* (Cincinnati: J.A. and U.P. James, 1847), 39.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Thomas, *Life of the Pilgrim*, as quoted from W.E. Garrison and A.T. DeGroot, *The Disciples of Christ* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1948), 99-100.

¹¹Garrison, *Disciples*, 100-101.

However, the fact that a number of churches in the Stone Movement had women exhorters, teachers, and preachers tends to suggest that he, at least early on, was convinced that they were exercising legitimate gifts of the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, Stone was greatly troubled by the defection of a number of his followers to the Shakers, whose founder Ann Lee not only claimed inspiration by the Holy Spirit, but maintained that in her person she was the second coming of Jesus Christ.¹² In addition, many of the Stonite congregations that used women preachers rejected the union between Stone and Alexander Campbell in 1832 and joined the Christian Connection, which descended from James O'Kelly in Virginia and Elias Smith and Abner Jones in New England. Because of this, few, if any, of the congregations that allowed women greater expression in worship, flowed directly into the modern lineage of Churches of Christ.¹³

Furthermore, at least until 1829, Stone continued to hold the view that according to I Cor. 11:5,6, women could pray and prophesy along with men in the worship assemblies, as long as they covered their heads as a sign of subjection to their husbands.¹⁴ However, by 1836 he had changed and stated that "by divine authority the women, who compose a part of the church, are forbidden to usurp authority over the man, or to teach, but to be in silence."¹⁵ Stone's apparent understanding of I Tim. 2:11,12, as a blanket prohibition against women teaching men, brought him into line with the prevailing cultural view in America during the first half of the 19th century, namely, the concept of "True Womanhood."¹⁶

Alexander Campbell and "True Womanhood"

The ideal of "True Womanhood" limited woman's role to the home where she was the example of domesticity, purity, and submissiveness.¹⁷ Rather than seeking equality with men in the public arena, women maintained their sphere of power and influence in the home, making it a refuge for their husbands away from the corrupting and alienating forces of the workplace in a growing commercial and industrial world. Mothers were also entrusted with the primary task of educating their children, particularly in matters of salvation.¹⁸ In this way women, i.e., mothers, gained in status as the head of the home.

¹²James DeForest Murch, *Christians Only* (Cincinnati: Standard Pub., Co., 1962), 90.

¹³Hughes, *Ancient Faith*, 377.

¹⁴Barton W. Stone, "Queries by Elder Joseph Hatchitt," *The Christian Messenger* 4 (December 1829): 13-14.

¹⁵Stone, "Principles, Not Men," *Christian Messenger* 10 (March 1836): 39. Actually, Stone seems to have changed several years earlier. In a question about the same passage (I Tim. 2:11,12), he said in essence that it means what it says and says what it means. See "Queries," *Christian Messenger* 4 (May 1830): 163.

¹⁶Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (1966): 152.

¹⁷Kathy J. Pulley, "Gender Roles and Conservative Churches: 1870-1930," *Essays on Women in Earliest Christianity*, ed. Carroll Osburn, vol. 2 (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995), 446.

¹⁸Loretta Long, "'An Abiding Interest and Love': Selina Campbell and the Sacred Responsibility of Motherhood in the Disciples of Christ," a paper presented July 17, 1997 at the Christian Scholars Conference, Abilene Christian University: 3.

Upon them depend the earliest education and first impressions of their children. They regulate or materially influence the principles, opinions, and manners of their husbands and their sons. Thus the sound and healthful society depend on them.¹⁹

Alexander Campbell agreed with these popular cultural views of separate spheres for men and women, and his hierarchical view of nature largely shaped the Restoration Movement in the pre-Civil War period, particularly through the Millennial Harbinger which he edited for over three decades. The sphere of the Christian woman, according to him, was not to be in the public realm or “the arena of political strife.” To the contrary, God confined her to a narrow area, to the “domestic circle,” where she was the “power, the light, the life, the glory.”²⁰ Campbell, however, was progressive in his views on the education of women. When considering the pros and cons of the issue, the Sage of Bethany declared, “If the question rested on my vote, whether, as a general rule, the female sex, or the male sex, ought to be better educated, as a philanthropist I would say, the ladies should have it.”²¹ He then anticipated the question, “Why should females be educated?” And he answered, “because posterity always depends for its moral character incomparably more upon the mothers than upon the fathers of the existing generation.”²² In other words, women should be educated precisely because it would make them better mothers. With this assessment, others such as Walter Scott and P.S. Fall argued that women should be educated, “not to make them good scholars,” but so that they could more effectively teach their children.²³

Thus, even though Campbell and many of his co-workers strongly encouraged schools for young women and affirmed their importance in American society, yet they believed in strict limitations on women’s roles, especially in the church. To illustrate, the question that was agitating a number of congregations at that time was whether women had the “right to deliver lectures, exhortations, and prayers in the public assembly of the church of God.” Campbell replied, “Paul says, ‘I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to learn in silence’ (I Tim. 1:12). I submit to Paul and teach the same lesson.”²⁴ Likewise, he and most leaders in the Restoration Movement prior to the Civil War (1830-1861) agreed that Paul’s injunction, “Let the women keep silent in the churches,” should be strictly observed. Instead of it being “a right or an honor,” it was actually “a shame for a woman to speak in the church.”²⁵

¹⁹Ibid. The quotation from Long is from an unnamed “Christian” from the first half of the 19th century.

²⁰Alexander Campbell, “An Address on the Amelioration of the Social State,” Millennial Harbinger, N.S. 4 (July 1840): 322.

²¹Campbell, “Female Education,” MH, N.S. 1 (June 1837): 22.

²²Ibid. Campbell wrote numerous articles encouraging “Female Seminaries” in the Millennial Harbinger from 1837-1852.

²³P.S. Fall, “Female Education,” The Evangelist (1838): 212; Walter Scott, MH 5 (September 1855): 525-529. See also Leonard Sweet, “The Female Seminary Movement and Woman’s Mission in Antebellum America,” Church History 54 (March 1985): 41-55.

²⁴Campbell, “News from the Churches,” MH, N.S. 4 (November 1840): 521.

²⁵Campbell, “Woman’s Rights,” MH 4 (April 1854): 205.

Women Praying, Prophesying, and Exhorting

The issue, however, continued to trouble brethren such as M. Riddle of Richwood, Ohio. He wrote to the editor of the Millennial Harbinger inquiring about “the Sister’s rights in the congregation” in his part of the country. After referring to I Cor. 11:5; 14:23-40; I Tim. 2:11,12, he asked, “Should the Sisters at a social or Lord’s day meeting, pray and prophesy, or speak a word of exhortation or comfort?”²⁶ Campbell’s reply was,

The Lord has not commissioned women to take any precedence over man. As for singing and praying, they are equal in all public acts of devotion—so far as communion is concerned; but in taking the lead or precedency in any of these in the Christian assemblies is not allowed by Paul. His judgment in this matter is paramount and final.²⁷

Although Campbell’s words appear to have been generally heeded by most “Disciples” or “Christians,”²⁸ there were a number of brethren who thought that such restrictions on women went too far. William Pinkerton, for example, wrote to the Millennial Harbinger as follows:

It will hardly be questioned by any well-informed brother, that if our sister in Christ may unite her voice with her brother in songs of praise and adoration and thanksgiving to God, she may not be denied the privilege of lifting up her voice in prayer and supplication to her Father.²⁹

However, he admitted that there may be times “when a woman should not pray aloud in the assembly—when, indeed, she in her Christian modesty, would not wish to.”³⁰ He further suggested, according to I Cor. 11:5, that it is possible that the men and women were not only praying, but also prophesying in the public worship. However, if that were the case; the latter were to cover their heads in order to demonstrate subjection to their husbands. In addition, he examined Paul’s commands that women remain silent in church and not engage in teaching or exercising authority over men (I Cor. 14:34; I Tim. 2:11,12). To him, these prohibitions were not absolute. While it is true that they would exclude women preachers, but basically, they were written “to correct a disorderly and unbecoming movement among the female members” of the church who engaged in “shameless boldness” and insubordination to their husbands.³¹

²⁶M. Riddle, “Queries,” MH, N.S. 7 (July 1857): 415.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Alexander Campbell thought that the more scriptural designation for followers of Christ to wear was the name “Disciple,” while Barton Stone favored the term “Christian.” For their reasons, see Murch, Christians Only, 115-16.

²⁹Wm. Pinkerton, “Duties and Privileges of Christian Women,” MH 5th S. 6 (September 1863): 422.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 423.

Public Versus Private Activity of Women in Worship

About nine months later, W.K. Pendleton, co-editor of the Millennial Harbinger, received the first of several letters from an "esteemed Bro. Faurot," concerning the question, "Shall women pray or exhort in public?" His question, of course, had to do with how Paul's injunctions against women speaking publicly in church could be reconciled with his apparent approval of women praying and prophesying in mixed company (I Cor. 11:4,5). Pendleton admitted that women could pray and exhort in private meetings "without any violation of the Scriptures, and with the very happiest result, even though some brethren should be present."³² However, he strongly maintained that Paul's prohibitions pertained to the regular assembly where he "said they must keep silence; that they are not permitted to speak in public; that they may not even so much as publicly ask a question, but must wait and ask it privately at home . . . What could the apostle say that is more explicit than this?"³³ Then, he continued by claiming that the gifts of prayer and prophecy which women exercised in I Cor. 11:5 are the very gifts which they were forbidden to use "in the public congregation, because it was not becoming in them to assume the lead in anything where their natural head, the men were present."³⁴

Bro. Faurot, however, was not convinced by Pendleton's arguments or his distinctions between public and private worship. He pointed out that what Paul prohibited in I Cor. 14 and I Tim. 2 was not women praying, prophesying, or exhorting in a modest way in the assembly, but women who were interrupting, causing confusion, and usurping the place of men as public preachers or teachers in the church. He further maintained that, far from introducing radical innovations into the Restoration Movement, as Pendleton charged, he knew of only "two congregations outside of Bethany,³⁵ that did not allow women to all the acts of religious worship, for when I speak of exhortation, it is in the same sense of giving utterance to religious emotions, like Mary's (Luke 1:46),"³⁶

Women Reading Scripture in Worship

The issue of women's participation in public worship, however, was not resolved by the above exchange of correspondence in the Millennial Harbinger. Instead, it continued after the Civil War, as is illustrated in a letter by James Maxwell to David Lipscomb, editor of the Gospel Advocate. It seems that the leaders of the inquirer's congregation had asked some of the sisters to participate along with the men in the public reading of the Scriptures on the Lord's Day, but some of the brethren objected, quoting from Timothy and other passages "that women should keep silent in the churches." He requested an explanation of these Scriptures in the light of their congregational controversy. Lipscomb, who was one of the most conservative leaders of the Restoration Movement in the late 19th and early 20th century, took what many today would ironically view as a liberal stance on this subject. He said that

³²W.K. Pendleton, "Shall Women Pray or Exhort in Public?" MH 5th S. 7 (July 1864): 325.

³³Ibid., 326.

³⁴Ibid., 327.

³⁵Alexander Campbell's home congregation.

³⁶R. Faurot, "Shall Women Pray or Exhort in Public?" MH 5th S. 7 (September 1864): 415-17.

there was nothing in the passages that “forbids a woman reading or singing or joining in any other worship of the brethren.” He pointed out that women “prophesied” in the early church and thus took “part in the worship under direct ministration of the Holy Spirit.” He cautioned, however, that “women should not in the public assemblies be forward as preachers or assume authority in teaching.” Accordingly, they should continue to practice

the ideas of modesty and submissive virtue, but to read and sing and pray and study the Scriptures at home with their husbands and children, with their neighbors in instructing them [in] the way of life, or in the quiet meeting with the brethren and sisters to learn and know the will of God is certainly no compromise of womanly modesty and delicacy, nor violation of the word of God.³⁷

Female Deacons in the Church

The paradox of the foregoing is that, even though Campbell and most of his contemporaries’ understanding of Paul was very restrictive for women in public worship, yet they did teach that women should be chosen by their congregations to function as deaconesses. As early as 1827, when contending for “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things,” Campbell wrote, “Amongst the Greeks, who paid so much regard to differences of sex, female deacons, or deaconesses, were appointed to visit and wait upon the sisters.”³⁸ To Campbell, the office of a female deacon was based on Rom. 16:1, where Paul stated, “From this last passage, as well as from I Tim. 3:11, it appears that females were constituted deaconesses in the primitive church. Duties to females . . . demand this.”³⁹

Campbell’s view of deaconesses was followed by W.K. Pendleton, his son-in-law, who said concerning Paul’s statement to the brethren in Rome, he “speaks of Phebe, as a deaconesses of the church” (Rom. 16:1). He also cited “the 1 Epistle to Timothy, 3:11,12,” where he interpreted the apostle “as describing their qualifications for office.”⁴⁰ Other brethren continued this line of reasoning, maintaining that the office of deaconesses was ordained by God specifically to minister to the needs of women. Robert Richardson, Campbell’s biographer, affirmed that “the deaconess had for her peculiar department the care of sick and indigent females, and those duties which can be better and more appropriately performed by females.”⁴¹ Walter Scott, the dynamic preacher and editor, also stated, “We could name a church in which the sisterhood are in the habit of assembling once a week at the house of one of the deaconesses to sew and make garments for the poor and needy.”⁴²

³⁷David Lipscomb, “Queries,” *Gospel Advocate* (November 9, 1876): 1110-11.

³⁸Campbell, “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things—No. XIX. The Deacons’ Office,” *The Christian Baptist*, 10 (May 7, 1827): 212. Again, a short time later he said that God instituted “deaconesses” as “female public servants, who officiate amongst the females.” “A Restoration of the Ancient Order of Things—No. XXX. Official Names and Titles,” *CB*, 12 (September 7, 1829): 48.

³⁹Campbell, “Order,” *MH* 8 (October 1835): 507.

⁴⁰W.K. Pendleton, “Discipline—No. VII,” *MH*, Series 3, 5 (May 1948): 292.

⁴¹Robert Richardson, “Order—No. 3,” *MH*, 11 (November 1836): 519.

⁴²Walter Scott, “Letters,” *The Evangelist*, N.S., 8 (March 1, 1840): 72.

In addition to the congregation mentioned above by Scott, we read of other churches in the literature of the mid-19th century that had deaconesses. For example, the Philadelphia church appointed some ladies to serve in this capacity,⁴³ as did the Baltimore church where Campbell visited and preached on two occasions, and the Chestnut Grove church of Kelton, Pennsylvania.⁴⁴ In the latter congregation, two deaconesses were appointed in 1845, two in 1846, three additional ones in 1860, two more in 1864, and another two in 1865.⁴⁵ From the notes of the Kelton Church of Christ, we read that congregational business meetings were conducted on a regular basis with both men and women in attendance. Deaconesses were appointed to take care of physical, financial, and spiritual needs of members and report back to the church on Sunday morning before “public services” began.⁴⁶

Women Deaconesses—Servants, not Officers

Other Restoration leaders favored deaconesses in local churches not as officers in a position of authority or official teachers of the brethren, but to minister to the needs of the congregation. When referring to both deacons and deaconesses, Robert Milligan, author of the influential Scheme of Redemption, wrote,

But to teach, is no part of their office. Were it so, women would never have been made deaconesses. . . . It is still true, however, that intelligent, grave, and pious females may do much for the feeble, the sick, and the destitute, especially of their own sex. The Phoebes should, therefore, constitute a part of the diakonoi of every fully organized congregation.⁴⁷

Actually, the only leader of the Restoration Movement in the 19th century who opposed deaconesses was J.W. McGarvey, professor at College of the Bible. He stated, “I am sure there was not” the office of a deaconess in the apostolic church. “Many a good woman then, and many a good one now, is a servant of the church without being appointed to an office.”⁴⁸ It appears that McGarvey rejected female deacons because he was concerned that women would try to exercise authority over men. A letter from a brother confirmed this fear when he noticed that strife existed between male and female deacons in his congregation. It was reported that four deaconesses were usurping the powers of the deacons. McGarvey revealed his bias by saying, “You will meet with men now and then who imagine that all women are

⁴³“Items from Correspondents,” Philadelphia Inquirer, 2 September 1868, p. 301.

⁴⁴Scott, “Letters,” The Evangelist, 3 (January 1834): 71.

⁴⁵See J. Stephen Sandifer, Deacons: Male and Female? A Study for Churches of Christ (Houston, TX: Pub. By J.S. Sandifer, 1989), 148.

⁴⁶Everett Ferguson, Bible professor at ACU, visited in the home of Everett Holt, an elder in the Kelton Church of Christ, in 1961 and was allowed to examine the journal that contained the church’s records and the minutes of their business meetings from 1838-1873. Selections from that material were published by Everett Ferguson, Tom Olbricht, and R.L. Roberts, Jr., and the above information was cited from them in “the Journal of the Church of Christ in Kelton, Pennsylvania,” Restoration Quarterly, 13 (Fourth Quarter, 1970): 224-262.

⁴⁷Robert Milligan, “The Permanent Orders of the Christian Ministry,” MH 4th S. 5(November 1855): 626.

⁴⁸John W. McGarvey, “Deaconesses,” Christian Standard 22 (November 1902): 1616.

angels, especially all that are in the church. This is a very serious mistake." He then cited the example of Euodia and Syntyche, suggesting that "they were ambitious for offices," and concerning Phoebe, he said, "There is not even a hint that she was a deaconess."⁴⁹

Woman's Suffrage and Temperance Movements

One reason for McGarvey's negative attitude toward female deacons, was undoubtedly the fact that he and other brethren had already been stung by the rise of women preachers in the last two decades of the 19th century. The impetus for women preachers increased as they became more involved with the Suffrage and Temperance Movements in America. It was women who took the lead in both efforts, holding rallies, preaching in the streets in front of saloons and hotels against alcohol and for women's rights, especially the right to vote.⁵⁰ But the street pulpits were not the only place where women's voices were being heard in the Restoration Movement. Many women became interested in mission work, and in 1874 they formed their own missionary society, the Christian Woman's Board of Missions (C.W.B.M). This society took its place along side of the earlier American Christian Missionary Society (A.C.M.S.) which was established in 1849 with Alexander Campbell as its first president.⁵¹

But just as there was opposition to the men's missionary society, so the conservative Lipscomb wing of the Restoration Movement, which was located mostly in the South, stood against the women's missionary society. Besides the fact that they viewed the C.W.B.M. as another human institution without scriptural authority, they also opposed it because some of its prominent leaders were women who joined with ladies from other churches in espousing the goals of the Temperance and Suffrage Movements. These women believed that the way to abolish saloons in the nation was to give women the right to vote, and Mrs. M.M.B. Goodwin illustrates how they campaigned for the right to preach in order to combat both religious apathy and the sale of alcohol. In the Christian Standard, she expressed her frustration in these terms: "The night of unbelief darkens our land, and King Alcohol holds an almost universal sceptre Yet we are told that it is a shame for a woman to raise her voice against this o'ermastering tide of sin and woe. . . ."⁵²

The Conservative Response to the Women's Movements

Conservatives like David Lipscomb viewed such ideas as a threat to society in general, and to marriage in particular. Concerning this, he said, "The habit of women preaching originated in the same hot bed with easy divorce, free love, and the repugnance to child bearing."⁵³ Even some women felt threatened by their sisters who became social reformers. For example, one woman, writing in the Firm Foundation under the pseudonym

⁴⁹McGarvey, "Deaconesses," Christian Standard (February 1906): 166; cited from Sandifer, Deacons, 153, 156.

⁵⁰Pulley, "Gender Roles," 468.

⁵¹Murch, Christians Only, 149, 137.

⁵²Mrs. M.M.B. Goodwin, "From My Stand Point," Christian Standard 1 (June 11, 1881): 186.

⁵³Lipscomb, "Should Women Preach Publicly?" GA (August 5, 1891): 486.

"Sarai," castigated mothers who "leave home and children and lecture on temperance and preach." She said that they would accomplish "infinitely much more good . . . by staying at home and making happiness for husband and children."⁵⁴ E.G. Sewell, coeditor of the Gospel Advocate, argued that if women get the vote, it will unleash a view of marriage, "which, if allowed to spread, threatens to destroy the most sacred of all institutions, and make America a homeless nation. Therefore, he reproached all women who seek to "break the 'bond of subjection'" laid on them by God "and assert their independence, vote, hold office, electioneer, and if necessary, fight their way to the ballot box."⁵⁵ Even though conservative "Disciples" opposed alcohol consumption, they saw woman's suffrage as the greater evil. As E.W. Herndon, a friend of David Lipscomb, said, "Voting women violated the scriptural principle of wives submitting to their husbands."⁵⁶ In addition, he affirmed, "If the saloon cannot be destroyed except by woman's suffrage, we say let the saloon stay."⁵⁷

Women Preachers in the Late 19th Century

The controversy over woman's role continued in the religious journals through the 1880s, but 1881 proved to be significant because that was the year that Clara Babcock began to preach. She served as president for the Woman's Christian Temperance Union in Whiteside County, Illinois, under whose auspices she spoke at forty-eight temperance meetings and obtained 196 abstinence pledges through her evangelistic fervor.⁵⁸ It was during this period that she also began to re-examine the arguments used by her contemporaries to exclude women from preaching. She came to the conclusion that Paul's prohibitions against women speaking or teaching publicly were not absolute but cultural in nature. They applied to unruly women in Paul's time who were "just brought out of heathenism," and in no sense were they applicable to mature Christian women's right to preach. As she thought through her role as a lecturer for WCTU, she couldn't see why it was acceptable to speak in church on behalf of the Temperance Union, but not deliver sermons from the pulpit on Sunday mornings.⁵⁹ After preaching for about a year, she was ordained and installed as the "pastor" of the Erie Christian Church in August, 1889, the first regularly ordained female minister in the Restoration Movement.⁶⁰

However, activities like this sparked a lively debate in the religious journals, especially in the South where attitudes were more conservative toward the role of women in worship. By this time, David Lipscomb had backtracked somewhat from his earlier view that

⁵⁴Sarai, "Talks with the Sisters," Firm Foundation 2 (August 1886): 4; cited from Fred Bailey, "Woman's Superiority in Disciple Thought, 1865-1900," Restoration Quarterly 23 (Third Quarter 1980): 157.

⁵⁵Elisha G. Sewell, "Women and Politics," GA 26 (October 22, 1884): 674.

⁵⁶E.W. Herndon, "Woman's Suffrage," Christian Quarterly Review 7 (October 1888): 608; cited from Fred A. Bailey, "The Status of Women in the Disciples of Christ Movement, 1865-1900" (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Tennessee, 1979): 229-30.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Glenn M. Zuber, "'The Gospel of Temperance': Early Disciple Women Preachers and the WCTU 1887-1912," Discipliana 53 (Summer 1993): 50.

⁵⁹Clara C. Babcock, "Woman in the Pulpit," CS (June 4, 1892): 482.

⁶⁰Obituary notice from Ernest R. Babcock, "Fallen Asleep," CS (July 25, 1925): 1045; cited by Pulley, "Gender Roles," 452-53.